Dongping Han: The Unknown Cultural Revolution

Dongping Han grew up during the GPCR and is the author of the book, The Unknown Cultural Revolution—Life and Change in a Chinese Village.

My book is about the education reform during the Cultural Revolution—I lived through it. I grew up on a Chinese collective farm. I started working on the farm when I was nine years old. At the time, the Chinese school would close for two days each week—two afternoons plus Sunday—for children to work on the farm. So I worked about two days each week while I was still in school. And the collective farm paid the students work points. The adults got ten points a day. I got 5.7 points each day working on the farm. So I was able to support myself when I was only nine years old. Everybody could work on the farm, and if you wanted to work you would always get a job. And my job at the time was an easy one. For example, the adults carried water from the river to the field, and I would water the plants with a ladle.

In my book I discussed the Cultural Revolution education reform and its impact on the countryside. When I was young, most people in the village were illiterate. Both my parents were illiterate. Before the Chinese Communists came to power, most Chinese farmers were too poor to go to school. My father started working in a factory full time when he was only 12 years old. My mom started working full time in an embroidery factory in my hometown when she was only six years old. So they didn’t have any education. I had five siblings. When I was growing up, many kids in the village who were older than I was were not able to go to school. Most of my cousins, my elder sister, were not able to go to school.

The Chinese Communist Party inherited an educational system that was biased against rural people. Most educational resources were concentrated in the urban areas. It was very hard for the rural kids to go to school. When I started first grade, I had to pass a screening test. If kids wanted to go to school they had to learn to write before they went to school, and they had to learn to count to 100 before they would be accepted into school.

But most of the parents didn’t have the skills to teach their children so they were all rejected. This screening test was necessitated because there was not enough room in the public school in the village at the time. But three years later, during the Cultural Revolution, every village in my hometown was empowered to set up a primary school of its own. There were 1,050 villages in my county at the time. Every village had set up a primary school during the Cultural Revolution years. Every school age child was able to go to school free. The Chinese government and the Chinese elite now talk about how education during the Cultural Revolution years was a disaster. This is simply a lie.

Education improved so much in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution’s ten years. Every four villages in my county set up a joint middle school. So children who graduated from the primary school were able to go to this middle school without any screening test. Everybody was able to go. And it was free. Every commune in my county had four high schools. There was only one high school in my county before the Cultural Revolution. And there were only two classes. From 1950 to 1966, for 17 years, that high school only produced 1,500 high school graduates. Of these 1,500 high school graduates, 800 went to college and never came back to the village. The rest of the 700 were working in the government or joined the army. There were almost no high school graduates in the countryside.

When I entered the commune high school in 1972, there were about 1,000 students in my year in my school alone. When I graduated from high school, there were more than 100 high school graduates in my village. These high school graduates in my village played a very important role in the development of the Chinese countryside. They were able to do a lot more things for the village than their elders were ever able to do.
Before the Cultural Revolution, we were only doing farming. During the Cultural Revolution years, the high school graduates helped diversify our village economy. We had a forest team composed of high school graduates. They planted many different kinds of fruit trees, pepper trees, as well as other trees. And we also built a factory. And there were 175 people working in that factory. In China today, rural young people have to leave the village to find jobs in the cities. But during the Cultural Revolution years we didn’t need to go anywhere. We were not anybody else’s slaves. We worked for our own future. And the 175 people working in the factory were able to generate an income for the collective, which greatly improved farmers’ livelihoods.

The factory also maintained the farming implements for the village. We had two tractors and two pickup trucks. And looking back, I feel the Cultural Revolution years improved the farmers’ lives in many ways because the production increased. And in my county, the grain yield more than doubled in those ten years. And the income more than doubled in those ten years. The Chinese government now says the Chinese economy was at the brink of collapse. That’s nonsense.

And when the Chinese government asked the farmers to disband the collective to farm on their own, farmers in my hometown resisted very hard. The government had to remove all the county government leaders from my prefecture in order to disband the collective. My village didn’t privatize all our assets, even though the government bought all the land from the village. But my village insisted, if they took our land they needed to compensate us with land from another area. So we didn’t lose our land. The village still owns as much as it used to own. The village is still doing very well today. And the farmers are able to retire today. My mom receives retirement money from the collective every month. In other villages where the land was privatized, the farmers are suffering hardship.

I went to college in 1978. In 1977 there were about 12,000 high school graduates in my commune. They all graduated from the commune high schools during the Cultural Revolution years. And all these people were eligible to take the college entrance exam in 1977. Of these people 2,000 took the exam, and out of these, I was the only person who was able to go to college. I was the only one from my commune of 50,000 people. I graduated from college and went to grad school and then went to teach in Zhengzhou University.

In 1986 I joined an American research team in China to do rural research. There were two American professors and myself. We went to a few villages in Hunan. At that time it was very rare to see a foreigner in the rural areas. So wherever we went in the village, there was a huge crowd following us—mostly young boys and young girls—who wanted to see what a foreigner looked like.

One day, while I was eating lunch, I asked the young kids to read some headlines in the newspaper. But they all shook their heads. And I thought they were shy in the beginning. And some kids said they were not in school. They were not in school! I was so shocked to hear that. I used to take it for granted that every child was in school. But since the commune has been dismantled, all the public school system, the medical care system, which were supported by the commune, had to go with the commune. I started thinking about the importance of the educational reforms during the Cultural Revolution years since then.